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The Rise Of Latin Dictators

Throughout most of its 200 years, the United States has held aloft the torch of liberty and has promoted democracy among its neighbors. But the painstaking progress has now been largely undone by a United States that suddenly began to see Communists under every bush beyond its southern borders.

The statistics of tyranny tell the story. In 1963, only four small Latin American nations—El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Paraguay—were ruled by military dictators. Then Brazil fell to a junta in 1964. Panama and Peru went military in 1968. The armed forces took over Bolivia in 1969, Ecuador in 1972, Chile and Uruguay in 1973. Argentina, after a brief military flirtation in the mid-1960s, has now fallen under harsh military rule. And behind most of the military dictatorships can be found former classmates in the Pentagon or shadowy figures in the Central Intelligence Agency.

There is shocking evidence, for example, that the United States quietly encouraged the generals to overthrow two of South America's democracies a decade apart in Brazil and Chile. In between, there were U.S. whisperings into the ears of other Latin American generals who suddenly seized power.

It has been established that the CIA in the early 1960s funneled millions of dollars into organizations that opposed the civilian regime of Brazil's President Joao Goulart. He was deposed. Interestingly enough, while a colonel named Vernon Walters was the U.S. military attache in Brazil.

Nine years later, this same Vernon Walters turned up as deputy director of the CIA. He was involved in funneling subsequent CIA millions to organizations that were opposed to President Salvador Allende in Chile.

And what did the U.S. taxpayers get for their money? Both Brazil and Chile are now ruled by repressive military dictatorships. They have brought a measure of stability to their countries. But only rarely has the economic trickle reached the poorer masses. For their dubious blessings, the people have paid a high price: arrests in the night, arbitrary imprisonment and torture for the crime of disagreeing.

But for the United States, the price has been higher. This country, once regarded around the world as the bastion of freedom, is now thought no better than its Communists rivals. The military governments of Latin America have become so oppressive that the moderates, including many who despise communism, have turned in desperation not to Washington but to Havana.

For in nation after nation, they have witnessed the love affair between the dictatorships and the Pentagon. Over the past 30 years, the Pentagon has squandered $2 billion worth of hardware and training on the military establishments of Latin America.

The growing concern of Congress hasn't yet stopped the flow. In the year ahead, for example, the American taxpayers will deliver $49.3 million in military aid to the Argentinian junta, $61 million to the Brazilian generals, $15 million to the military dictators in Bolivia and $1.4 million to General Alfredo Stroessner's regime in Paraguay.

Military brass from virtually every nation in Latin America, meanwhile, have trained at such U.S. military schools as the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., and the Naval War College at Newport, R.I. Indeed, the Pentagon has even established one school that is specifically designed to train Latins. It's called the School of the Americans and is located in the Panama Canal Zone. Over 30,000 Latin American military men have trained at the school over the past three decades. Of 1,765 students who attended the school in 1975, 575 came from the Chilean regime.

The Defense Department also maintains military advisers in 17 Latin American countries. Thus the top military brass in Latin America and the United States have developed close personal relationships.

At the White House and State Department, there has been little sentiment for restoring democracy in Latin America. It doesn't seem to matter whether the governments use terror and torture. Our diplomats prefer to keep a "low profile" and confine their objections to "quiet representations." Secretary of State Kissinger appears to be quite comfortable with repressive dictatorships.

Take Argentina, for example. Kidnappings, murder and torture have become daily occurrences. The outrages are committed by militants of both political extremes. There have been "more people killed in one year in Argentina," one State Department source told us, "than in five years in Northern Ireland."

The situation has deteriorated since the military junta took over on March 24. The dictatorship, rather than join in the murder and mayhem directly, permits right-wing para-police and paramilitary squads to roam the cities and countryside, dispensing street justice.

Some key congressmen, such as Rep. Edward Koch (D-N.Y.), would like to cut off military aid to Argentina as a gesture of U.S. concern. U.S. law states that this can be done if a country demonstrates a "consistent pattern" of "gross violations" of human rights. But the State Department characteristically has objected that a "consistent pattern" of abuse must still be proved.

Responds Koch: "Bold steps are needed to impress the Argentine government that its grace-period is over." At least dimly, those who believe the United States should promote democracies, not dictatorships, are being heard.

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